

# Feline friends: From pest control predator to LOLcats memes

By Smithsonian.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.08.16

Word Count **743**



A British Shorthair cat looks on during a cat exhibition in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek on February 16, 2013. Cat owners from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had gathered in Bishkek to show off their pets. Getty Images.

On the Internet, there are a surprising number of websites about cats. On them, you may find cat sayings like these: "As every cat owner knows, nobody owns a cat" and "A dog is a man's best friend. A cat is a cat's best friend." Of course, cats and humans have lived together for thousands of years. But the sayings do show the very real love-hate relationship people have with their feline pets, as the history of the house cat shows.

## Cat Domestication Timeline

It has taken a while for scientists to figure out just when and where cats first became tame. One would think that archaeologists might answer the question easily by digging up the remains of ancient cats. But wild cats and domesticated cats have remarkably similar skeletons. Some clues first came from the island of Cyprus, in 1983, when archaeologists found a cat's jawbone dating back 8,000 years. It didn't seem very likely that humans would have brought wild cats over to the island.

A "spitting, scratching, panic-stricken wild feline would have been the last kind of boat companion they would have wanted," writes Desmond Morris in "Catworld: A Feline Encyclopedia." Thus, the discovery seems to show the cats were domesticated before 8,000 years ago.

In 2004, an even older site was found in Cyprus. In it, a cat had been buried with a human. Scientists became even more certain that the island's ancient cats were tame. They pushed the domestication date back to at least 9,500 years ago.

In 2007, a study was published in the research journal *Science*. It fitted together more pieces in the cat domestication puzzle by studying their genetic history. Genes control how every part of the human body develops and functions. All domestic cats, the authors declared, descended from a Middle Eastern wildcat, *Felis sylvestris*, which means "cat of the woods." Some of the study authors guess that cats were first tamed about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.

While 12,000 years ago might seem a bold estimate, it makes a lot of sense. That is exactly when farming communities began to flourish in the Middle East.

## **Cats Became Useful**

When humans were mainly hunters, dogs were of great use. That is why they were domesticated long before cats. Cats, on the other hand, only became useful to people when they began to farm and needed to store extra crops. Extra grain, like wheat, was kept in storehouses. With the grain storehouses came mice. When the first wild cats wandered into town, the stage was set. The cats were delighted by all the mice in the storehouses, and people were delighted by the pest control.

"We think what happened is that the cats sort of domesticated themselves," said Carlos Driscoll, one of the study authors. The cats invited themselves in. Over time, people preferred cats that were tamer, and some cats adapted. They produced the dozens of breeds of house cats known today. In the United States, cats are the most popular house pet. There are 90 million domesticated cats slinking around the U.S., and cats are in about one-third of U.S. homes.

## **Mixed Feelings For Felines**

Humans still have wildly mixed feelings toward cats, however.

The ancient Egyptians worshiped cats, which is a well-known fact. Scientists found a cat cemetery in Egypt with 300,000 cat mummies. Bastet, an Egyptian goddess of protection, had the head of a cat, and killing a cat in Egypt often meant a death sentence for the murderer.

Ancient Romans also thought highly of cats, which were seen as a symbol of liberty. In Asia, cats were valued because they hunted rodents that chewed up treasured manuscripts.

For some reason, however, cats came to be hated in Europe during the Middle Ages. Many thought they were connected to witches and the devil. Many cats were killed in an effort to protect people from evil. Scholars think this actually helped to spread the plague, a terrible disease which was carried by rats. Not until the 1600s did people start thinking differently about cats in Europe.

Nowadays, of course, cats are the stars of comic strips and television shows. By the mid-1990s, cat services and products had become a billion-dollar industry. And yet, even now, the cat doesn't seem to be able to entirely shake the connection with evil. After all, how often do you see a movie's maniacal arch-villain plot the world's destruction, and stroke the head of a Golden Retriever?